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ABSTRACT

The historical study of education as it can contribute to an understanding of current educational problems, practices, and attitudes is discussed. Historical studies can be profitably addressed to the following issues in education today: curriculum reform; the relationship between the state of the economy and educational innovations; the impact of population changes on education; education for minority groups; the arguments for and against freedom and choice versus structure and prescription, breadth versus specialization, and elitism versus open access; the relevance of formal education to work; stereotyping and discrimination in institutions; and production and utilization of knowledge. New approaches in the historical study of education may result in new generalizations about a broad range of educational problems and the historical perspective gained may play an important role in shaping educational policies. (Author/MK)

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Some Thoughts On The Importance Of Historical Studies in Education

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Some Thoughts On The Importance Of Historical Studies In Education

I. It is important that the historical perspective be brought more strongly to bear in current studies in education. The scientific study of education should take into serious consideration the contribution that history can make to our understanding of current educational problems. The rapid changes of the times in which we live and the many educational problems we face demand that history must now seek new kinds of facts to answer new kinds of questions. There is much to be done in the organization of historical studies to achieve such a goal.

Increasing recognition of the interplay between education and society has demanded new approaches to the historical study of education. Many questions need to be asked and conceptual models for dealing with these must be devised. The broad purposes which the history of education now embraces and which are complicated by the inadequacy of the present state of knowledge, demand a more systematic treatment of that field of study.

Analytical as well as synthetic studies in the history and philosophy of education can be invaluable in aiding a better understanding of current educational problems and our efforts at solving or at least alleviating them. The analytical method tends to rely heavily on the techniques of logical and/or linguistic analysis as these are brought to bear on everyday problems in education. The synthetic method is characterized by the comprehensive investigation of major areas of historical and philosophic concern as they relate to educational problems.

Both analytical and synthetic studies in the history and philosophy of education are needed. In analytic treatments relatively limited problems are selected and carefully delineated, questions are postulated and issues are clarified. The synthetic treatment goes beyond all this and seeks to pose comprehensive solutions. Indeed both approaches compliment each other and should not be exclusive. However, in view of the present uncertainty in the educational scene in the United States administratively as well as theoretically, the analytic treatment at least as a first step is sorely needed.

II. There are several important issues in education today that can be profitably addressed from the historical standpoint. We need a strong historical perspective on curriculum reform from the unit method of the 1920's through the diversities of the progressivism of the 1930's, and the popularizing of these ideas after World War II into the Sputnik era. This should not be a mere listing of ideas, but of their contention, the politics of their dissemination, the extent and nature of their adoption in practice, as well as their effectiveness in the educational system.

Historical studies are needed on the relationship between the state of the economy and such structural, managerial, or substantive innovations as length and organization of school year, investment in educational technology, accountability for instruction, concern for vocational education and teacher pupil ratios. The last mentioned is a highly controversial issue today and history should help throw some light on it.

The increase in school enrollment rates is another area for historical study which may help to answer some important questions. What variables, what events, what people have contributed to the development of such increase?

How did increase come about--in spurts, gradually, differently in different environments? What problems had to be faced? What changes have occured in American education as a result of efforts to solve problems from time to time?

It is well-known that the enrollments for elementary schools in the 1930's and for secondary schools in the 1940's were influenced by the lower birth-rates in the 1920's and 1930's. Lower birth rates have been associated with expectation of slowdown in growth and stability in population size and age distribution. In studying these issues history can show the impact of population change on economics, politics and objectives of schooling, as well as what influence this impact had on educational adjustments.

One of the biggest educational problems of our time is concerned with minority groups. Perhaps if we apply a broad definition to the term minority groups in a historical perspective we might be able to construct a foundation for the exploration of those problems. For example one might define minority groups during the period 1840-1860 as the Irish immigrant; the period 1880-1920 as Southern European immigrant, and the period since 1920 as Black, Mexican and Indian Americans.

There are certain questions, which, if answered might aid in the establishment of a conceptual framework for defining minority groups. Who defined them as minority groups? What characteristics did the definers utilize in describing minority groups? We must seek to explain historically what were the assumptions of the definers of minority groups, thereby laying the groundwork for current educational problems. In time a sociological, philosophical and historical framework could be applied.

The running historical argument between freedom and choice versus structure and prescription also needs careful study. While the main focus here is curriculum, it must be admitted that many other aspects of the tone and atmosphere of educational institutions are also involved. This issue goes beyond mere freedom and manipulation as posed by educational institutions. Rather the real question involved here is whether general policies and requirements or the classroom instructor's judgment should be the basis for control. It is imperative that there be a clearer understanding of whether the proper climate for student learning be created by bureaucratic or more spontaneous forms.

The issue of breadth versus specialization also should be addressed and studied. The issue of the liberal arts versus a vocational conception of education is intricately involved here. This area has been the focus of much debate for many decades, and some of the many compromises over the years have formed the basis of graduation requirements in most colleges and universities. These compromises have also affected the educational programs of elementary and secondary schools.

Recent critics of schooling have raised some important questions which must be investigated from the historical viewpoint. The record of the American high school must be careful studied and weighed against the alternatives suggested by the advocates of "de-schooling." The benefits claimed for formal study in general education have long been challenged and today even the formal study components of professional schools are under attack. Historians and philosophers of education must work with others in a giant effort to assess the meaning of the rejection of the

standard rationale for formal schooling and to explore the possibilities of a more credible one.

The issue of elitism versus open access needs to be brought into sharper focus. It is true that completely open access, at least in the New York City context, is quite recent. But indeed access to the university has been open to all high school graduates in some Midwestern States for many years. This then provides a good basis for a deep inquiry into the results of various degrees of elitism within American higher education from the historical perspective. This could be measured against the career patterns of graduates and drop-outs, as well as against other variables in an effort to note the results and effectiveness of openness.

III. While the object of historical research is to arrive at generalizations that may be used for the solving of current problems, philosophy aims at the clarification and isolation of issues which can serve as a valuable prerequisite to later empirical investigation. Education is often seen as an expression, in a practical context, of abstract philosophical theories. And most philosophical theories can be and often are studied historically as an expression of intellectual historical forces prevalent at a given time.

There are some central philosophic concerns within the broad area of the formulation of educational policy which, if properly pursued, might throw some light on the problems involved. Educational policies should be governed by principles of justice and equality. How can these principles be defined, and how are they differentiated? If education is to meet the needs of students how can these needs be characterized and justified? In the formulation of policy what is the relative importance of the pull of the

problem to be solved versus the abstract theoretical considerations that relate to policy-making?

Philosophic considerations in the study of minority education are also important. What does it mean to say that certain minorities are educationally disadvantaged? Given the stress of standards of quality, the need for equality of opportunity, and the lack of equality of achievement, how can education for minorities function in such a way as to take account of differences and still attend adequately to norms of achievement? Given the pluralism that minority groups necessitate, how can an educational system be designed which can simultaneously provide for unity and diversity in the society?

IV. The historical study of education has come to be viewed not merely as an end in itself but as a very promising avenue of approach to a very broad range of problems. And a new approach is in progress. Commenting on this new approach John E. Talbott states:

> New approaches to the history of education differ from the old primarily in the attention now being given to the interplay between education and society. But this is a very great difference indeed. What was once a narrow specialty is now seen to have such broad ramifications that it has become hopelessly ill-defined.[1]

New approaches to the study of the history of education will result in new generalizations in many areas. Many conventional histories attempt to attach a class label to an educational institution, and to demonstrate that the institution responded to the need or demands of a particular social

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[1] John E. Talbott, "The History of Education," in Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Science, Winter 1971, p. 134.

class. But it is not clear who determined these needs or whether indeed the institution responded to them. Further, the dynamics of the interaction between education and the structure of society should be better explained. More detailed research on who actually got educated is very much needed. Such studies, it is hoped, would show that relationships between education and social structure have not always been in accordance with the intentions of the providers of education.

V. Historical studies can provide information which can be very useful in policy-making. Indeed policy makers and politicians use historical justification quite often. In the field of education, for example, decentralization is sometimes opposed on the grounds that it would lead to graft, nepotism and the politicization of education. This argument was used in the Progressive Era in support of centralization.

In his recent book, The Great School Legend (1972), Colin Greer points to the fact that urban schools failed European immigrants very badly and that it should not be alarming that they fail blacks and other minorities today.[2] Such questions have important policy implications and need to be more carefully studied. Other issues can be affected by a historical sense. For example, it is encouraging to think that a perfect teaching technology is in sight. However, once the early twentieth century ideas of Edward L. Thorndike, David Snedden and Franklin Bobbitt on behavioral objectives, behavioral modification and competency-based teaching become known, such enthusiasm might subside.

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[2]Colin Greer, The Great School Legend (new York: Basic Books, Inc., 1972), Chapter 5.

Historical inquiry should definitely be emphasized in certain sections of the selected five issues which the National Institute of Education has selected as the focus of research. In order that there be a better understanding of the fundamental cognitive processes in reading, it is necessary that historical studies of early reading in the home be conducted. This approach would also aid our understanding of the nature and effects of non-school influences on motivation, competence, performance and attitude in linguistic communication.

In the area of relevance of education to work the success of formal education in preparing individuals for adult responsibility should be studied from the historical perspective. The adequacy of present educational arrangements for job entry and progression can adequately be studied and evaluated in a historical context.

The whole area of racial, cultural, sex-role or religious stereotyping or discrimination in institutions lends itself to historical inquiry. While it is important to guard against looking backwards too much it is equally important to consider that the institutions and customs that exist in the present and that give rise to present social ills and dislocations did not arise overnight. They have a long history behind them. Efforts to deal with them simply on the basis of what is obvious in the present will result in the adoption of superficial measures which will not get to the heart of the problems, thereby rendering them more acute and more difficult to solve.

In the area of production and utilization of knowledge it would be profitable, through historical studies, to trace changes and developments

in the various ways of maintaining and providing access to documentary knowledge about education. Studies of historical changes in education costs, educational attainment and measured learning in the area of efficiency and productivity in education is specially worthy of note. This should well be the pattern of approach for many other studies.

The historical study of education can contribute to our understanding of current institutions, practices and attitudes. Concepts which are at the root of public policy-justice, democracy, equality, liberty-have all been worked out histroically. It is the task of history to trace how these concepts have been articulated in the American past and how they have been embodied, or obscured in its institutions.

Educational history has a very important role to play in the shaping of educational policies. It must broaden its focus and turn its attention to the ideas, interest groups, and institutions that help mold educational and social policies that the educator in the field seeks to execute. Indeed, history must not only reconstruct selected fragments of the past, but according to Merle Curti and Charles Beard must also provide credible explanations of the development of contemporary events, thoughts, manners and institutions."[3] Historical generalizations can even be useful in providing general guidelines for the future.

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[3]Theory and Practice in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography, Social Science Research Council (New York, 1946) p. 134.

The noted historian, E. H. Carr made a very apt comment on the use of historical generalizations for future actions:

> The historian is ...bound to generalize; and in so doing, he provides general guides for future action, which, though not specific predictions are both valid and useful....If two or three children in school develop measles, you will conclude that the epidemic will spread, and this prediction, if you care to call it such, is based on a generalization from past experience and is a valid and useful guide to action.[4]

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[4]Edward H. Carr, What is History? (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), pp. 87-88.